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Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)
Genre: F/M, Fluff and Angst, Reunions
Language: English
Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers
Relationships: Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper
Status: Completed
Published: 2018-02-04
Updated: 2018-04-28
Packaged: 2022-04-22 04:42:21
Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Chapters: 2
Words: 16,455
Publisher: archiveofourown.org
Summary:

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'Back...to...Mike....please....not to the cabin...' El whispered, her voice a mere whisper, scraping painfully against her dry throat, but her eyes were steadfast on his, leaning up, as if she pulling up every last scrap of energy she had to convince him, breath coming out faster as panic flared across her face.

Hopper nodded quickly, whole body jerking with the movement as he pushed her hair back from her face with a shaking hand, quickly trying to reassure her.

'We're heading back to Joyce's right now. No cabin tonight. I won't keep you from seeing Mike anymore. I swear it, kid.'

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

> Hey guys!!! So....I have been sitting on this one-shot for so freaking long it's not even funny. It's been half finished for like a month, not long after I finished 'Operation for El'. Procrastination is apparently my middle name haha But I finally sat down and finished this today and am so excited for you all to read and let me know what you think. There might be a second-part to this, I'm not sure yet, but I have a few ideas so you never know <3

Hopper cradled El in his arms, the dark husk that was of all that was left of the Hawkins's labratory now eerily quiet as he walked through the gates, trailed by a pale, sweating Dr. Owens as he limped along behind him.

Hopper pulled open the door of his truck, carefully propping El against the seat, lip twitching down worriedly as her head slumped forward, so weak she could barely hold her head up, but it didn't stop her from trying, the fear in her eyes obvious as she continued to watch Owens anxiously, even as her eyelids kept drooping. She was exhausted but too terrified to relax.

'It's okay, kid,' he whispered, running a hand over her slicked back hair, eyes gentle and reassuring on hers, before closing the door carefully, turning back to the doctor, stiffening slightly as the sound of sirens began to rise in the distance.

'You going to be alright, Doc?'

Owens waved a hand at him, leaning heavily against the fence, keeping his weight off his injured leg as he gave a tight, pained smile, white lines bracketing his mouth.

'I'm fine. You better get her out of here before the others arrive to cover up this mess.'

Hopper nodded, turning around to walk around the car, pausing when Owens called out to him, turning back with an impatient frown.

'I just wanted you to know...I keep my word, Chief', Owen's said, lifting his chin in the direction of Eleven who was staring at him with wide eyes through the window, jerking back as she saw his attention was on her, visibly shivering.

Owen's face fell slightly, stomach clenching nauseatingly at the fear that made the girl's face somehow even paler, that made her shrink away from even the sight of him. He knew what Brenner and the people he worked with had done to that girl...the inhumane experiments, locking her in a tiny closet for a punishment when she wouldn't do the monstrous things they asked of her, even stealing her from her Mother at birth. He didn't understand how she'd done it...how she'd possibly found the strength and the compassion to come back into the lab, the place that had been her prison for twelve years, to stop the monster. But she had and she saved the entire town. Maybe the entire world. It was humbling and filled him with an awe that he hadn't felt in a long time.

He knew that there was nothing he could ever do that would make up for all the horrors she'd been through, to give her back what she'd lost. Nothing would ever make it right but damn it, he was going to try. Starting with keeping her secret and helping her live a normal life in anyone way he could.

Hopper eyed him for a long moment, and Owens had the very distinct, uncomfortable feeling that he was somehow reading his mind, barely resisting the urge to shift like a child caught doing something naughty, before he seemed to come to a decision and gave one stiff nod, patting the top of the car.

'I'll hold you to that. Good luck with the leg, Doc.'

Owen's saluted him, waving him off as Hopper quickly jumped into the car, not even bothering to put his seat belt on in his haste as he pulled out of the parking lot, managing to turn the corner onto the road that lead back to Hawkins's and making it a mile up the road before he saw the long line of ambulances and military vehicles sent

to clean and cover up the collosal mess they'd caused turn into the Laboratory.

He let out the breath he hadn't been aware he'd been holding, barely resisting the urge to rest his head against the steering wheel in relief. They'd made it. Somehow, by some miracle, they'd both made it out of that damn place in one piece. The gate was closed and El was safe.

Hopper jumped slightly, jolted from his thoughts as he felt a small, cold hand touch the sleeve of his shirt, shaking it so weakly it made his heart ache, turning worried eyes onto El where she was now curled up on the seat, the jacket he'd wrapped around before he'd lifted them out of that hole swamping her, eyes huge and dull with exhaustion.

She looked so fragile and young, her breath coming in heavy, painful gasps that rattled her chest, the makeup around her eyes smudged even more than before from tears that were still drying on her cheeks, mixing with the blood that still lay slick and wet beneath her nose and ears. Panic rising like bile in his throat, Hopper clenched his hands on the steering to keep from pulling the car over and tugging her into his arms, to convince himself that she was really here, that she was real. He wanted to tell her that he'd never let anything bad happen to her, that he was so sorry she'd had to go back in there, and she'd never have to do anything like that again, but he knew there was no time for that now. Now he needed to get her somewhere safe where she could recover. He knew that was the most important thing but it still took everything in him, every bit of strength he had left after everything that had happened, to keep driving.

'What is it, kid?' he said, voice thick and gruff, catching and squeezing her hand gently with his, shocked slightly by how weak her squeeze back was, barely a flutter of movement against his skin.

'Back...to...Mike....please....not to the cabin...' El whispered, her voice a mere whisper, scraping painfully against her dry throat, but her eyes were steadfast on his, leaning up, as if she pulling up every last scrap of energy she had to convince him, breath coming out faster as panic flared across her face.

Hopper nodded quickly, whole body jerking with the movement as he

pushed her hair back from her face with a shaking hand, quickly trying to reassure her.

'We're heading back to Joyce's right now. No cabin tonight. I won't keep you from seeing Mike anymore. I swear it, kid.'

El's bottom trembled at his words, her shoulders slumping back against the seat in relief as she let her eyes slide shut, knowing Hopper was telling the truth. When Hopper made big promises like this one, not like the little ones that he often forgot about or couldn't help breaking, he kept them.

I'm coming back, Mike. Like I promised....El thought, her lip twitching up into a small, tired smile as she let the heavy exhaustion that had been dragging at her for hours and she'd stubbornly been fighting, her need to save her friend's more powerful than her need for sleep, finally win, letting it pull her into the cool relief of unconsciousness.

Hopper unclenched his fingers on the steering wheel as he forced himself to relax, feeling like a bloody over-concerned mother as he saw El drift off out of the corner of his eye, the tight ball of anxiety and fear that had slid into the base of his gut since they'd first walked into that damn horror show of a Lab loosening slightly as he reached over and tugged his jacket closer around her, beyond relieved that she was finally getting some rest.

When she'd hit the floor after closing the gate he'd been sure she'd been dead. That he'd lost her just like he'd lost Sarah and he'd wanted to die along with her. It had been one of the worst moments of his life, reaching for her blindly, his heart racing in his chest, feeling like every movement was too slow, and he'd realised then how much he truly loved her. It had been the most terrifying moment of his life since finding out Sarah's test results all those years ago...no Demogorgon...no Upside Down...not even facing the monster on the other side of the portal and seeing it reach for her...none of it had compared to those two moments. And he'd known he couldn't lose her. He wouldn't survive it. He couldn't lose another daughter.

Hands shaking as he'd reached for her, all the breath had rushed from his lungs as she'd raised eyes dull with pain and exhaustion to his,

blood dripping steadily from her nose, so weak she could barely lift her head, but she was okay. She was alive. His heart had only started beating again when he'd pulled her into his arms and felt her hug him back, her fingers lying limply against his back, sobbing against him.

'You did so good, kid', he said, pressing a kiss to her head, holding her to him. And he hadn't let go until they'd reached the car, only holding her tighter as her head slumped back, falling unconscious several times as they walked through the deathly quiet Lab and collected the Doc, her powers drained completely.

He'd never see her like that before. It was not like when she'd used the pool in the gymnasium to try and help find Will...this was a million times worse. She had used up everything, every ounce of her energy and powers to save them, to close and trap the...Mind thing...whatever her friend's called it...back where it couldn't hurt anyone else. He hated seeing her like this. So fragile and weak. His girl was anything but weak. She was the strongest person he'd ever met, brave and kind despite everything she'd been through, frustratingly stubborn and a royal pain in his ass sometimes. But he loved every part of her and the thought of losing her... Hopper shook his head, refusing to even think it again. He would do everything to make sure that would never ever happen again.

He knew that she wasn't telling him everything, the whole story of where she'd been the last two days, that there were parts she was deliberately keeping a secret, but he could be patient when he had to be. He knew she'd tell him if and when she was ready. He couldn't really blame her for not telling him. After their fight only two nights ago...
Hopper squeezed his eyes shut for a moment as the memories of a few nights ago came rushing back to him, thumping his head against the back of his seat with a heavy sigh.

If he was being honest with himself, something he tried desperately not to be most of the time, he could admit that he really hadn't handled that night, or really the last year, well at all. Who was he kidding? It had been a goddamn disaster.
What was he thinking promising her things he couldn't ever gurantee? Telling her she could leave the cabin when he truly had no

idea when she would be able to leave. Keeping her hidden in that cabin day after day, the cabin he now knew she'd come to see as nothing but just another prison, where she'd again been kept away from the world, unable to see Mike or her friend's except in her mind, and had to follow rules they both knew she hated and resented.

And when all that frustration, anger and hopelessness had finally bubbled up and spilled over, when it had burst out of her in a wave of telekinetic energy that had shattered every window in the cabin as she'd screamed and sobbed, he'd known that he'd royally fucked up.

The fear that had slowly begun to grow inside him over the year since he'd found her, as he started to love her more and more with every day even as he told himself he wouldn't grow attached, that he wouldn't care again, had come horrifying to fruition when he'd radioed her the morning after he'd been saved from the tunnels and he had known as she hadn't answered his call that she wasn't just ignoring him because she was mad as she usually did. This time she was really gone.
Gone because of him and all the promises he'd made but couldn't keep and should never have made ('Friend's don't lie', he
had almost been able to hear the words echoing in his head over and over, a haunting reminder of his failure...again), gone because of the awful words he'd said to her and never meant. And the knowledge had almost destroyed him.

He shouldn't have yelled at her. The very thought of the words that he had screamed, words that he'd used to cover up the pure fear that had rushed through him when he'd stepped into the cabin and found it silent and empty like before she'd come, terrified that she'd been taken, that the black hole had sucked her away, that he'd lost her like everyone else in his life, made his veins run cold.

Yep, he'd really screwed up. But he wouldn't be making that same mistake again, he thought, determination rising inside him. Things would be different this time. He'd make sure of it. And different just happpened to include letting El see Mike Wheeler.

A small smile quirked his lips as he thought of the boy that he knew would be pacing the floor waiting for them...for El....to return. As if Wheeler would ever let him try to get away with not letting them be

together. He'd definitely do way more than throw a punch at him if he tried to keep them apart this time.

His expression sobered, guilt twisting his stomach at the memory of Mike's tall and lanky frame shuddering with heart-wrenching sobs that shook against him as he held him tight, a years worth of misery, grief and fading hope bursting out of him uncontrollably.

Although he knew he'd made the right decision in keeping El hidden, and he would do it all again if it meant keeping her safe, after tonight it was undeniably clear to him that this time everything had to be different. He couldn't do it again, he couldn't separate them. It had devastated them to lose each other the first time. If they had to be separated again...Hopper knew it would break them both. For good this time. It had become achingly obvious to anyone who knew them that they couldn't live without each other.

Hopper glanced over at El, his face softening slightly as he looked at her, relaxed and vulnerable in a way she only ever looked in sleep or...or with Mike. They needed each other, that much was clear. Just the way those two kids looked at each other, the devotion and pure, unconditional love that shone in their eyes, how gently they touched and spoke to one another, and how they seemed to be drawn to one another always...like a gravity only they could feel. He'd been stunned to see them together, to see the smiles that had almost blinded everyone in the room, clutching each other as if afraid if they let go the other would disappear forever, eyes only for each other, like no-one else existed in the world.

It was so rare and strange to see in two kids so young but they'd found something most adults spent their whole lives searching for and many never found. They were only thirteen but they'd already found their soulmates.

His girl had a boyfriend.

Hopper sighed, running a hand over his face as a wave of exhaustion and resigned acceptance rushed through him. Well, this was going to be interesting, he thought, shaking his head with a bemused chuckle. Raising a teenager was hard enough with all those damn hormones and rebellion...and raising a teenager with telekinetic powers was

even harder...but a telekinetic teenage girl in love? He was so not ready for this shit.

But....even though every fatherly instinct inside him screamed for him to put a stop to it, that this boy was trying to steal his girl away, that she was way too young to be in a relationship, he knew he couldn't. El had him wrapped around her little finger even if she didn't know it (though Hopper was pretty damn sure that kid was well aware of her power over him), and he would do whatever it took to make her happy, and that meant keeping Wheeler by her side. And Wheeler...Mike....he was a good kid, even if he didn't want to admit it. He knew he would never do anything to hurt El. It was clear as anything that Mike would rather throw himself off a cliff than ever cause El a single moment of unhappiness.
Mike loved her and El loved him. So Hopper would make sure they were able to be together. He'd do anything for her.

She was his girl. And he looked after what was his.

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Mike paced back and forth across the living room floor, bits of paper fluttering around his feet, skin feeling too tight as he glanced out the window what felt like the millionth time in the last hour, clenching his hands by his sides to try and hide their shaking.

Where were they? What was taking them so long? Please be alright. Please El...he thought, a sob rising in his chest that he quickly swallowed back, throat clenching as the panic he'd been fighting since they'd gotten back from the tunnels made his breath come in hard, frantic huffs which only become faster with every minute she didn't walk through the door. That she didn't come back to him.

Mike felt his friend's eyes on him, could see them exchanging nervous and concerned looks from the corner of his eyes but he didn't care. This was all wrong. She should be back by now. Joyce, Jonathan, Nancy had returned at the same time as them with a pale and sweaty Will propped up between them, a Will who smiled at all of them as he was lead towards his bedroom to get some much-earned rest, looking dazed but himself again, completely free of the Mindflayer's control. So where was El? She must have closed the gate at the same

time as Will had been saved so why wasn't she here? What if she had gotten hurt? What if she was....

Mike swallowed hard, squeezing his eyes shut as he shook his head from side to side, as if trying to shake the thought away. No, he wouldn't think that. This was El...she'd be fine. She was fine.

'Please be okay...please...', he sobbed, breath coming in quick, anxious gasps, chest so tight his ribs ached, his while body shaking.

He couldn't lose her. Not again. Please let her be okay, he begged silently.

A hand grasped at Mike's shoulder, making him jerk in a flare of terror which faded quickly as he spun around to find Lucas and Dustin standing in front of him, eyes wide with a mix of worry, wariness and slight fear.

'Mike, you seriously need to calm down...

'I can't, Lucas! You don't understand. You weren't there...you didn't see what those...those things can do to people...'

Mike ears began to buzz, barely able to hear them as they desperately tried to calm him down, stomach jerking and bile rising in his throat as the memory of the Demodogs racing out of the tunnels, running towards El at the Lab, of what they could do to people morphed into one in his mind and suddenly all he could see was El being ripped apart by the creatures just like Bob.

He jerked forward at the image, grasping his knees as his stomach jumped, barely swallowing down the vomit that threatened to escape, his vision beginning to grow grey. He distantly heard Lucas and Dustin's panicked shouts behind him before he felt himself being pushed to sit, his head pressed firmly between his knees.

'...in and out, Mike...Jesus Christ, this is bad....come on, buddy, you're going to be no use to El if you're blubbering like an idiot,' Dustin said, finally breaking through the buzzing in Mike's ears, his voice forcibly cheerful and taunting, purposely trying to get Mike to react, to snap out of it, even as he rubbed comforting circles on his back,

Mike didn't even realise he was crying until he felt the wetness on his cheeks begin to drip down his neck, sniffling as he raised his tear-stained face to where Lucas and Dustin knelt beside him, pale and wide-eyed. Lucas jolted, swallowing hard as he took in his friend's tortured expression, his dark eyes filled with fear and huge in his face that so much paler than usual.

'Mike...it's going to be okay...' Lucas started but Mike shook his head, wiping at his cheeks with shaking fingers.

'You don't know that. Last time....she disappeared for a whole year last time she saved us. What if it happens again? ...I can't...I can't lose her again...'

Lucas and Dustin exchanged a look, realisation suddenly filling them, and they understood. El's disappearance, losing her, had affected them all but no-one more than Mike. He had changed so much over the last year, withdrawing further and further into himself until it had been almost impossible to reach him, becoming angry and sullen, refusing to hang out with them, and spending most of his time in the blanket fort he refused to take down, the only thing that proved to him that El had been real, that he hadn't imagined her. And, they now knew, using the Supercom to call for her every night, never losing hope, though she hadn't been able to call back. To get her back to just lose her again...it would destroy him this time. They both knew Mike wouldn't survive it again. And they understood the fear. They had lost her too, but they'd also lost their best friend along with her, as much as if he'd been sucked away into the Upside Down as well.

They lowered themselves fully to the floor, pulling Mike into a group hug as they talked quietly, not noticing as Max hovered hesistantly on the edge of the group, knowing she wouldn't be welcome. Mike and her were just making some progress with the whole friendship thing, and she knew it would be completely ruined if she interrupted, knowing that if he wasn't so torn up about El that he would hate that she was seeing him like this, so vulnerable and broken. And she got it. She would hate it too if she was in his position.

'Come on, Mike. This is El we're talking about. She's like...the most powerful girl in the world. More powerful than Professor X even.

Nothing is going to happen to her,' Dustin said, patting Mike's shoulder gently.

'Dustin's right, Mike...which is a sentence I never thought I'd say,' Lucas said, pulling a disgruntled face that made Mike give a short, watery chuckle and Dustin narrow his eyes at him, glaring warningly, 'This isn't last time. El...she's stronger than she was last year and she managed to take down the Demogorgon even then and come back. She would never break a promise to you. She'll be back.'

Mike looked at his two best friend's, seeing the belief on both their faces and nodded, hugging them back just as tightly as they held him, breath slowly beginning to smooth out into something that resembled a normal breathing pattern.

The calm that settled between the three friend's was shattered as the sound of tyres on the Byer's gravel driveway and the rumble of engine made Mike's head snap up, eyes wide, heart thumping against his ribs as he saw headflights flash across the curtained windows, filling the room with soft yellow light.

He scrambled to his feet, tripping over Dustin's legs as he ran out of the house, almost collapsing with relief as he saw Hopper's familiar truck pull to a stop next to Jonathan's rusting car. The relief quickly faded however, replaced with a terror that made his entire body go cold, heart racing so fast he was sure it would explode from his chest, as he saw the shadow of El slumped unconscious against the passenger window.

He couldn't remember moving but suddenly he was at the passenger door, yanking it open with shaking, frantic hands. He froze, icy-cold horror filling him as he took her in, unable to quite believe what he was seeing. God, what had happened to her? Her slicked back hair was matted around her face, a face that was so pale it looked grey, a sickening colour that he'd only ever seen on corpses in films. There were dark circles under her eyes and her veins were pressing against her thin skin, looking seconds from bursting through, but Mike barely noticed them, his eyes unable to shift from the huge amounts of bright red blood that had dried under her nose and on her neck, thick and startling against her pale skin.

There was so much of it. How had so much blood come from her? he thought, feeling slightly sick, mind dazed and numb with shock.

'El? EL? What happened? Why won't she wake up?' Mike asked, hands shaking her frantically, seconds from becoming hysterical, as he shifted his eyes to Hopper as he came around the car, reaching past Mike to unbuckle El's seat belt and gently lift her from the car and into his arms.

Hopper paused, looking down at Mike, his chest clenching with sympathy, face softening as he saw the way his thin chest heaved with panicked gasps, shaking so hard he almost vibrated with it, his freckles dark flecks against his pale skin. The kid looked like he was about to pass out, he thought in alarm and quickly reached out awkwardly, juggling El so he didn't drop her, and squeezed his shoulder hard, grounding him.

'Hey, hey, take a deep breath, kid. She's alright, I swear. Closing the gate just took a lot out of her. Once she sleeps it off she'll be fine.'

Mike stared at Hopper for a long tense moment, eyes searching his face as he tried to figure out whether he was telling him the truth or not. He felt his shoulders slump as he saw the truth in Hopper's uncharacteristically open face, his eyes shutting for a second as he took a deep breath, throat bobbing jerkily as he swallowed back the panic that threatened to choke him, before he nodded at him, silently telling him he had it under control now.

Hopper nodded back, slapping him affectionately on the back as he turned towards the house, Mike following behind him, hovering anxiously at his side, not moving his eyes from El's too still form.

The others crowded around them both as Hopper entered the house, wadding through the throng of them with a barely stiffled growl of annoyance.

Damn it, it was like a zoo in here. Why the hell weren't all these kids back home where they belonged? Hopper thought, grunting slightly as he walked over to couch to set El down on the couch, his back aching slightly. Those meals have really been doing the kid some good. She weighed a freaking ton!

Hoppers eyes widened as he passed one of the couches and spotted Steve sprawled across it, snoring quietly, looking like he'd been bashed with a sledgehammer. A quickly melting ice-pack was laid over his eyes, eyes that were a nasty shade of purple and red, so swollen they were almost fused shut, tiny rainbow band-aids stuck all over the cuts on his face. What the hell had happened to him? What had he missed?

Hopper turned to look at the four teenagers surrounding him, seeing the thin layer of dirt that covered them and raised his eyebrows, before shaking his head with a quiet huff, feeling a headache beginning to come on. On second thought, he didn't even want to know.

'Oh shit! Is she okay?' Lucas asked worriedly, lifting up on his toes to look at El's in Hopper's arms, blanching as he caught sight of her blood-smeared face.

She looked half-dead. Lucas had thought she had looked bad in the AV room when she'd used the radio to try and contact Will when he was stuck in the Upside Down. She had been so weak and sick, face pale and barely able to stand or focus on them in a way that had been horrible and scary to see and Lucas hadn't even liked her then. But this...this was nothing like the aftermath of the bath in the gym or even killing all those people at the school. This was terrifying.

'Jesus! She looks dead', Dustin said, his voice a too-loud horrified whisper, echoing Lucas's thoughts.

Mike reluctantly dragged his attention from El, shooting Dustin a half-annoyed, half-exasperated look.

'Shut up, Dustin. She's not dead.'

'What happened?' Dustin asked, ignoring Mike completely, not offended, knowing it was the wrong words to say in that moment and how prickly Mike would be till El woke up. He was like a toddler with it's favourite teddy bear, he thought, giggling inwardly.

'Why won't she wake up?' the red-headed girl said, moving in closer slowly, her voice quiet among the loud voices of the two boys who

spoke over one another, only growing louder with every second.

'One at a damn time!' Hopper said, shaking his head with a mumbled curse, rubbing his forehead. Jesus, how had Harrington done it? He'd been here less than five minutes and he already wanted to send them all packing. Is this what was his life was going to be now? Chasing after a bunch of teenagers, having them take over his cabin every damn weekend? Probably, he thought with an inward groan, El and these kids were most definitely a package deal and they both knew he couldn't say no to her. God damnit, he was seriously losing his touch.

They followed him as he laid El down on the couch, Mike immediately sitting beside her, grasping her hand in his and lifting his jumper to wipe at the dried blood on her face with gentle fingers, his dark eyes soft and worried as they flickered over her face, eyebrows drawn tightly together with concern, desperately searching for any sign of consciousness.

Hopper blinked at the gesture, slightly stunned by the tenderness of it all, at how how natural and loving the gesture was, Mike completely uncaring and unembarrassed by the fact that his friend's were watching. Most boys his age would be mortified by being caught showing affection or being all lovey with a girl, choosing instead to pretend not to like a girl or that girls were gross just to avoid their friend's teasing. He knew he sure as hell had denied his crush on Joyce to his friend's for years. But not Mike. He didn't seem to care at all, his eyes only El, murmuring to her quietly, words that Hopper couldn't quite catch. Words that were just for them.

Hopper shook his head, slightly dazed by the devotion and strength of what they clearly felt for one another, dragging his attention back to the teenagers that were crowding around him, eyebrows raised expectantly, faces eager for information.

'What happened at the Lab....uh....sir...' Lucas added belatedly, stuttering slightly as Hopper raised an eyebrow at him, lips twitching with amusement, taking the role of the leader since Mike was clearly distracted.

'Did she do it?' Dustin asked, his face uncharacteristically serious,

tugging anxiously at his curls as he remembered what had happened at the school with the Demogorgon. And the Mind Flayer was so much bigger and stronger. Just the thought of El facing it....of going against something so evil and monstrious...it made every hair rise on his body with fear. This was the real shit. El could have died. For real this time. The only thing that calmed him was the sight of El...of his friend...sleeping peacefully on the couch.

Hopper nodded in answer to Dustin's question.

'She did. The gate's closed.'

'And....and the monster?' The red-headed girl....Max?....asked a little nervously as she looked down at the unconscious girl on the couch, looking a little sick as she took in the blood that coated her too-white face. She looked like a victim in a horror movie. What the hell had she had to do to close the gate?

'Back where it belongs. She'll be alright. Closing the gate just took more of her powers than she's ever used before. I don't even know how she managed it', Hopper said, slumping wearily on the couch beside El's feet, leaning his head back. 'I've never seen anything like it. I mean...she floated in the air, for gods sake.'

Mike's head snapped up, his mouth hanging open, eyes wide as he stared at Hopper in stunned disbelief.

'She levitated?'

'No way!'

'What the fuck? That is so cool!'

'Hey language,' Hopper told the Henderson kid, rolling his eyes at them as they ignored him, talking excitedly over one another.

'...imagine what else she could do?'

'Levitating....freaking levitating....she's better than Professor X...she's Jean Grey!'

Hopper turned to Mike, the only one who's eyes were still on him,

wactching as his expression changed as their eyes met, eyebrows lowering angrily, clenching his jaw so tight Hopper was surprised he didn't crack a tooth. Clearly, the kid wasn't going to forgive him anytime soon...and he really couldn't blame him.

Hopper pretended not to notice, instead answering his question.

'Yeah she did. I don't think she even knew she could do that.'

Mike's head turned back towards El, his angry expression fading again as he looked at her, face softening completely,, reaching up to push a stray strand of hair out of her face with trembling fingers.

'I knew she could close it.'

'You're one of the reason she could, you know. She was scared....terrified to go back into the those labs...but she did it. She's braver than me...I don't think I could have gone back in after being through what she has. But she did it...to protect us. To protect you. She loves you, kid', he said, giving a small, straight-lipped smile, reaching over to pat his back as Mike's eyes snapped up to his, mouth slack with shock, staring at him for a long moment before his face seemed to light up, glowing under the thin layer of dirt that covered him.

Mike's cheeks creased with a smile so big it made his cheeks ache, feeling it wobble slightly, tears filling his eyes as he stared down at El, so much joy rushing into him at Hopper's words that he felt like he would burst from it, like he could float on air. El loved him! Even after all this time she still liked him...still felt the same way. He'd known she'd missed him when she'd ran into his arms only a few hours before but to hear those three little words....even if they weren't from her yet...to know that she loved him just as much as he loved her...it was unbelievable. The most amazing thing that had ever happened to him. Nothing could beat this. He would never ask for another thing in his entire life. He had El back...and she loved him!

Hopper's throat tightened a little at the emotions racing across Mike's face, eyes suddenly hot in a way that he knew meant he was going to start balling like an idiot if he didn't get it together soon, but he couldn't quite get rid of the lump that had formed in his throat. He

knew now that his girl would never live a single moment of her life without love. Not while Mike Wheeler still breathed. The pure love that shone on his face as he looked at her, the gentle smile, the soft way he spoke to her, it was clear as day that he would do anything to keep her safe and happy, fight anyone (probably even him, he thought with a wet chuckle) who tried to tear them apart again. What else could he ask for in the boy his daughter had given her heart to?

Hopper shoved back the emotions that threatened to choke him and quickly turned back to the teenagers that were still talking loudly amongst themselves, clearing his throat to get their attention.

'I really need to be getting you all home. I'm surprised your parent's haven't called the station already looking for you', he said, glancing at the clock on the wall pointedly, grinning as all three of their head's snapped towards the clock, gulping audibly as they saw it was almost midnight, exchanging horrified looks.

'Oh shit! I am so freaking screwed', Dustin said, face going pale as he thought of the shit storm that awaited him at home. His Mom might have been distracted by Mews disappearing but there was no way she would have missed the fact that he had not come home tonight. He was in so much trouble.

'You think you're screwed? Mom is going to kill me', Lucas groaned, burying his face in his hands, 'I'm going to be grounded till I'm 90!'
Max was the only one who shrugged, unconcerned. She doubted her parent's had even noticed she was gone. Her step-dad mostly ignored her and her Mom just went along with whatever he said these days. It's not like they were around much anymore, always leaving her alone with Billy. Not that they'd care all that much anyways, she thought sullenly, crossing her arms over her chest almost defensively, already working on an excuse in her head just in case by some miracle they had noticed.

'Don't worry, I'll come up with something. Just let me move El into one of the rooms and we'll head out,' Hopper said, gently nudging Mike aside, ignoring the disgruntled glare he sent him, and lifted El back into his arms. 'Uh...any idea where there's a spare bed?'

'You can put her in Will's room. He's in with me and Jonathan and Nancy went to his room when we got back,' a tired voice said from the doorway and Hopper glanced up, his heart dropping as he saw Joyce framed there, looking tiny and exhausted, heavy circles under her eyes, her throat circled by purple bruises and her arms wrapped around her waist so tight, like she was trying to hold herself together. Like her arms were only thing keeping her from completely falling apart.

'Hey', he said, voice soft as he walked over to her, being careful not to touch her, knowing from experience that one wrong move or word could be the one to shatter her completely. And it was almost impossible to pick the pieces back up once that happened. They both knew way too much about that. About loss. 'How you holding up?'

Joyce shook her head, pressing her lips together to hold back the sob that shuddered through her, the pain so fresh, so raw, she could barely breathe as it lanced through her chest. She couldn't talk about it....just couldn't.... If she let herself think of that moment...of watching those creatures tear him apart...the sweet, kind, selfless man who had sacrificed himself for her family...she knew it would break her. And she couldn't break right now. Will needed her. She had to be strong.

'I can't think about it right now. Will's here and he's okay. I just need to focus on him right now.'

Hopper nodded, wanting nothing more than to pull her into his arms, to hold her close, to try to make it better. But he knew he couldn't. Nothing could ever make it right. Only time...and even that seemed like a joke sometimes. Time didn't make the pain go away completely...only dulled it until you could function, until you could get through everyday without falling apart. It would always be there. They would always be there. All he could do was be there for her, and he fully intended to do that. No matter what.

'I'm here if you need me, Joyce. Know that.'

Joyce gave him a small, brittle smile, patting his arm gently before turning and walking slowly back down the hall, closing her bedroom door behind with a quiet, final click.

Hopper looked at her for a long moment, his shoulders slumping, before he made his way into Will's room, walking carefully through the mess of papers on the floor, the image of the tunnels that had started all of it, and laid her gently down on the bed, tugging the quilt up over her tiny body.

'I'll see you in the morning, kid', he told her quietly, leaning down to press a soft kiss to her temple.

He was unsurprised when he turned around to find Mike inches from him, expression determined, braced as if for battle, his dark eyes burning.

'I'm not leaving her,' Mike said, standing by the bed, body stiff, fists clenched by his side, face stubborn and defiant, as if daring him to say no, ready to fight him to stay by her side, 'She would want me here. You can't hide her anymore.'

Hopper's gave a heavy sigh as he took in the anxiety and fear that had left Mike's eyes wide in his pale face, eyes that were almost begging him beneath the heated resentment they both knew he felt towards him. He pinched the bridge of his nose as he felt his temples begin to throb with the headache that had been threatening for hours, feeling like he'd aged ten years in the one night.

There was no point even trying to convince him to head home with the others. It didn't seem like Nancy wasn't going anywhere soon from what Joyce had said, and it was common knowledge around Hawkins's that the Wheeler's rarely had any idea where their children were nowadays. Or really cared. And anyways, Mike was right. El would want to see him when she woke up and who was he to deny them this. After everything she had gone through...everything she had sacrified to save them not only once but twice now...this was the least he could give her. That he could give them both.

He couldn't hide her anymore, not now that everyone knew and the truth was he didn't want to. El deserved the chance to be with her friend's, to actually get the chance to be a kid for once in her short, deprived life. She'd already missed out on so much time already...so much time with Mike. Surely this wasn't a big ask.

Not that the kid was asking, Hopper thought ruefully, pulling his hand away to look down at Mike who continued to stare at him, jaw clenched so tight Hopper was surprised he didn't crack a tooth.

'Fine. Just...leave the door open. And sleep on the floor', he said, giving him a warning look before turning and walking out the door, already regretting his offer to drive the others home, wanting nothing more than to fall on his face on any available flat surface and sleep for the next week.

Demogorgons....Demodogs....the Mindflayer....and now having to deal with his adopted teenage daughter's boyfriend...and more than likely his future son-in-law. Jesus Christ...was the world ever going to give him a break? If he had a choice he'd rather take on the Demogrgon any day? No competition.

Mike stared after him, stunned by his easy agreement before he scrambled to grab the spare pillow and blanket off the bed, quickly making a bed on the floor inches from where El lay unconscious. He laid down on the hard ground, not caring that he'd probably be sore in the morning from it, reaching up and taking El's limp hand between both of his, squeezing them gently, eyebrows drawing with worry as he felt how cold she was, leaning up to tuck her blankets further up to her chin to make sure she stayed warm.

'I'm right here, El. I'm not going anywhere till you wake up. I promise'.

He closed his eyes reluctantly, slowly beginning to slip into a fitful sleep as he listened to El's deep, even breaths, feeling something tight and painful in his chest, that had lived their since she had disappeared almost in front of his eyes last year, loosen and fade completely, replaced by a bone-deep contentment.

She's finally back, he thought, a tiny smile curving his lips before his exhaustion finally dragged him away into sleep.

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El let out a quiet groan as she slowly drifted into consciousness, reaching up to rub her gritty, sleep filled eyes as she gingerly sat up, wincing as her head throbbed, feeling a tiny being was living inside it

and beating her brain with a hammer.

She smiled slightly at the silly thought, trying to push herself up onto her arm. She frowned, letting out a huff of annoyance as her arms quivered weakly before falling uselessly back at her side, every muscle in her body screaming and protesting every movement, burning painfully.

El's eyes snapped open, confusion quickly filling as she looked around the dark, shadowy room she was in. This wasn't her room at the cabin. Her heart slammed against her ribs painfully hard as she sat up quickly, fingers clenching in the sheets beneath her, fear causing her breath to speed up.

Where was she? How had she gotten here? What happened? she thought, a million questions rushing through her mind, panic quickly rising inside her, her head aching painfully as she strained to remember something...anything.

The panic faded quickly when memories of the last few hours began to flash across her mind. Of going back into the Lab that had been her prison for twelve long years, of travelling in the elevator down into the darkness and facing the monster that was trying to hurt her friend's, that had reached for her, wanting to hurt her too. Wanting to take her over her mind and body like it had Will's.

She had closed the gate, she realised, a wide grin splitting her cheeks. She'd really done it. She saved them all like she'd told Kali she could. She'd saved Mike....wait, MIKE!

El's eyes widened and she glanced around frantically, her heart racing in her chest, though a part of her somehow sensed he would be close. The knowledge didn't stop her breath from catching in her chest as she looked down and caught sight of Mike fast asleep on the floor beside the bed she was sitting on, his arm slung over the side, as if he'd been reaching for her in his sleep.

Her lips trembled, hot tears filling her eyes that she quickly blinked back, not wanting to miss a second of seeing him again. She had him back. They were finally together after so long waiting, after so much longing and pain. She had her Mike.

Ignoring her protesting, shaking muscles, El inched carefully off the bed and moved down to knell on the floor beside him, reaching out with shaking fingers to brush back his floppy black hair from his forehead. Her eyebrows drew together as her eyes flickered down to his cheeks, noticing the layer of dirt coating his skin, frowning slightly at the strange colur of it, cocking her head to the side in confusion.

How had he gotten so dirty? What had he been doing while she was gone? she thought, as she touched his cheek curiously.

She jumped, a quiet, surprised yelp escaping her throat as Mike suddenly jerked awake, sitting up so quickly that their foreheads knocked together with a loud thump.

'Ow!' El said, pulling back quickly, rubbing at her forehead with a irritated grumble an, flinching as her head throbbed with her movement, her headache only made worse by their skulls smashing together, lifting surprised eyes to meet his wide, shocked ones.

Mike didn't even notice the pain throbbing through his skull, unable to focus on anything but the sight of El in front of him, awake and staring at him as if he was the greatest thing she'd ever seen, her lips tilting up into the widest grin he'd ever seen grace her lips.

'Mike', she whispered, her expression awed, eyes moving over his face hungrily, as if she was trying to memorise every inch of him.

Mike swallowed hard, a sudden lump forming in his throat as he lifted a trembling hand from where it lay limply beside him, his fingers shaking so hard he saw her eyes dip to it, lips twitching down with sudden concern. He reached out hesistantly to touch her face, stomach clenching with a sudden fear that he felt like he would consume him.

He was so afraid...afraid that if he touched she'd fade away...disappear like she had so many times in his dreams. But when his hand met warm skin, skimming over her cheek lightly, everything inside him, all the control he'd been holding onto for so long, that had been keeping him from breaking completely, shattered. The breath he'd been holding escaped in a shuddering sob as he pressed

his forehead to hers, breathing her scent into his lungs.

El's own breath hitched in her throat as she felt Mike's hand cup her cheek, her eyes sliding shut as she leant into his touch, unable to believe that this was truly happening. That they were really back together.

'You're here,' Mike whispered, his voice harsh and thick with unshed tears.

El opened her eyes, eyebrows drawing together in fresh confusion as she saw the tears quickly filling the dark eyes she adored, his words awed and almost incredulous.

'Yes, I'm here. I told you I would be.'

Mike ran a hand over his eyes, sniffling loudly even as he let out a small startled laugh, happier than he'd ever been to hear her voice again, to hear that same sweet, questioning lilt it often had, bewildered by him as she often was. How weird that he'd missed even that? he thought before he let out another quick laugh, feeling light and happy in a way he hadn't in
months. Who was he kidding? He'd missed everything about her.

'I thought....I thought I must have dreamed it all. I've dreamt about you coming back so many times and when I woke up you'd still be gone. But it's real this time. You're really here.'

El's face softened with understanding, and she inched in closer to him, giving him the half-smile that he had missed so much it made his heart ache to see it again, as her eyes searched his.

'I'm real. I promised you wouldn't lose me, Mike. We don't break promises.'

Mike's face crumpled at her words, reaching forward to yank her into his arms, hugging her so tight the air rushed from her lungs with a quiet 'omph.' El let out a small squeak of surprise but she was already relaxing into his arms, wrapping her own around his neck and holding on just as tight, hot tears prickling at the back of her eyes, feeling his own falling onto her shoulder.

She tucked her head under his chin, drawing in the familiar scent that clung to his skin into her lungs with a content sigh, her fingers curling around his soft, black hair at the back of his neck.

He was here. She couldn't believe this was real. That he was really, truly here with her. Being held by him like this....safe and protected in his arms...the place she had known she belonged from that very first hug at the quarry when she'd saved him and he'd told she wasn't a monster...it was everything to her.

She'd wished for this, had dreamed of this moment, for so long and it was finally here. She finally had him back. The boy who had saved her, who had showed her kindness and given her a safe place to hide, who had taken her out of the rain when he hadn't even known her, who had been the first to like her for who she really was and not for her powers. The boy she loved with her entire being and who she would never let go of again.

Her lips trembled, tears spilling down her cheeks as she clutched him tighter, afraid to let go, scared he would disappear in a puff of smoke as he had so many times in the void when she'd tried to touch him. But feeling him warm and solid beneath her hands, his frame shuddering with sobs against her own, made the fear fade away into nothingness, and all that was left was joy and relief so pure she sagged with it.

Mike pulled away, wiping at his cheeks and runny nose with the back of his sleeve with a sheepish grimace as El did the same, her lips twitching up slightly in amusement, her cheeks flushed, and nose slightly red from crying, her eyes bloodshot and black eyeshadow even more smudged, making her look slightly like a racoon, but to Mike she'd never looked more beautiful.

He leant forward to press his forehead against hers, unable to believe this was really happening, that it wasn't all a dream, that they were really finally together. But if it was a dream he never wanted to wake from it. He would gladly live in this make-believe world forever. Just as long as they could be together.

After a long while they lifted heads to look their full, soaking each other in, taking in all the changes they'd missed over the last year.

Mike felt his heart clench, his lips curling up into a small smile as he really looked at her for the first time. She had hair, something he'd noticed when she'd walked through the door, looking so cool and bad-ass it'd made him proud to call her his. She'd always been pretty, even without hair, her features elfin and graceful, but there was a healthiness to her now that she'd lacked before. Her cheeks were fuller, skin darker with a slight tan and she was clearly happier, more prone to smiles than she was before. And she could talk so much better.

Hopper had obviously been doing a good job looking after her, Mike thought reluctantly, eyes narrowing slightly at the thought of Hopper and how he'd kept her from him, but quickly shook it off, not wanting to ruin their chance to be together, to really reunite without all the others watching on, with his anger at the Chief.

Mike breathed in her now unfamiliar smell, the smell of hair gel and smoke and the slightly rusty smell of blood mixed together, as well as something else...something soft and sweet that he remembered from last year but had almost forgotten...almost lost altogether. Something that was simply El. He never wanted to lose it again.

El studied him right back, her fingers moving through his hair with gentle fingers, a warmth spreading through her chest as she was finally able to be close enough to him to see him properly. He had gotten taller, she'd known that the second she'd stepped into his arms, the top of her head barely brushing his shoulder, having to stand on her toes to hug him. His face had lost the softness it had before, his features now sharper, and his hair was slightly longer though just as uncontrollable and floppy at it had been before, a fact that made El ridiculously happy. She liked his hair just as it was and didn't want it to change, not in a single way.

She lowered her hand to trace the new sprinkling of freckles that now ran from his temple down in a straight line to the very edge of his chin, her lips pursing out slightly as she concentrated, counting them slowly.

'There's more than last time', she said, quietly, her eyes shifting to meet his.

Mike flushed at her words, feeling ridiuclously happy that she'd noticed such a small change about him, that she memorised him that well. She noticed him! He knew he was acting like a complete love-sick idiot but he couldn't help the wide, crooked grin that spread across his face.

'Uh...yeah...I get them every summer.'

El glanced down at her pale, unmarked arms and sighed, pouting childishly.

'I want some.'

'Well...maybe you'll get some next summer as well,' he told her, secretly finding her small pout completely adorable.

El beamed at the thught of a whole summer spent with Mike and her friend's and nodded eagerly, before tilting her head at him, her expression suddenly questioning.

'How did you get so dirty?'

Mike's eyes widened and he quickly looked away from her, plucking at the edge of the blanket over him to avoid looking at her.

'Uh...the thing about that is...we...uh....I mean, Dustin, Lucas, Steve, Max and I....we wenttothetunnelstosetitonfiretokeepthedemodogsdistracted', he said, the words blurring together, coming out so fast that El could only blink at him for a second, trying to make sense of them.

Mike flushed bright red under her gaze, wincing when he saw her eyes widen with sudden horrified understanding before they narrowed to glare at him, expression dismayed.

'Mike! You shouldn't have done that. You could have been hurt', she told him, the very idea of Mike in those tunnels that she'd heard so much about, surrounded by the demodogs that had tried to attack her and Hopper as she'd closed the gate, making her heart speed up with fear and horror, taking his hand in hers to reassure herself that he was here and okay.

What had he been thinking? she thought, shaking her head slowly. He was always so selfless, trying to protect those he loved no matter what the risk, but he always forgot to look after himself in the process, like almost killing himself by jumping off the quarry to save Dustin. Lucky she was back. She could protect him now.

'I had to, El. I couldn't sit there and do nothing. You were in danger. If I could do anything to help you, I was going to, no matter the danger.'

He couldn't have just sat there and waited for her, knowing she was risking her life for them again. He would have gone crazy. Maybe it had been stupid...okay, it'd been completely stupid...it was the craziest thing he'd ever done, including trying to fight a Demogorgon with a sling shot and rock, but he would do it again in a second if it meant El ended up where she was now, safe and by his side.

They glared at each other a long minute, before El deflated, leaning forward to rest her head against his shoulder with a shuddering breath, closing her eyes.

'Sorry. I....it just scared me thinking of you being hurt. I don't know what I'd do if I lost you again. I missed you, Mike.'

Mike shook his head, face soft as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her in to his side.

'I missed you too, El, you have no idea how much. I was so scared. Are you okay? What happened with the gate? How did you end up with Hopper?'

So El told him everything about her year away from him. About the Upside Down and Hopper finding her, about the cabin which had quickly become her home, about Hopper teaching her to read and write. About learning morse code, and watching television, Eggo Extravangas and of going into the void every night to visit him, to listen to him speak to her.

Mike stared at her, eyes wide, his expression suddenly full of so much disbelief and hope it made El's heart ache.

'So all those times when I thought I heard or saw you....you were really there? I wasn't crazy.'

El nodded, ducking her eyes shyly, playing with his fingers.

'Yes. I visited you every night. I needed to see you...even if it was for only a few minutes. I....I'm so sorry, Mike...that I couldn't answer you. I wanted to...I really did...'

Mike shook his head quickly, gently lifting El's chin up so she looked at him, the guilt darkening them making his stomach clench, expression fierce.

'Don't be sorry, El. I understand. I'm just happy you're okay. All that matters is that you're here now.'

That you're home, he added silently, brushing back a loose bit of her hair, smiling softly when she leant into his hand, her eyes never leaving his as she spoke.

'Thank you, Mike'.

Mike pulled back, frowning, confused.

'For what?'

'For calling me every night. For not giving up on me.'

For keeping me going, she thought. She knew that she would have given up, lost hope completely months ago, if it hadn't been for those nightly visits where she could see him, hear him to speak to her, even if she couldn't speak back. To know that he was still waiting for her, that he hadn't given up...it had meant more than he could ever know. If he could be brave and strong, so could she.

Mike's chin wobbled as he blinked back tears, his face going so soft and tender that it made El's bottom lip tremble with her own tears as he gave her the bright, crooked smile she loved the most, his dark eyes warm and gentle on hers.

'I'll never give up on you, El. No matter what happens, I'll always look for you.'

El stared at him for a long moment, sniffling slightly, before she slowly lifted her hand to his face, biting her lip before she spoke quickly, afraid she would lose her nerve.

'I want to....can I kiss you?' she asked quietly, blood rushing to her cheeks so quickly she felt like they were suddenly on fire. She had finally learnt what Mike had done in the cafeteria, before all the horrible things that had followed, and what him pressing his lips to hers had meant from watching the shows on television. Kissing was something you did with someone you loved. And she loved Mike. She had wanted to kiss him again from the moment their lips had left each other's that first time so long ago.

El didn't look away even as her cheeks grew warm, grinning when she saw the way Mike's eyes widened, his own cheeks going a pretty pink, but he nodded, smiling so brightly it almost blinded her.

'Yes', Mike said, rising up on his knees so eagerly it made El laugh, the sound soft and breathy, one he'd never heard from her before, and it was like music to his ears, the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard, everything inside him melting at the sound.

Bloody hell, he loved her. He should have been shocked by it, by how much his feelings had grown over their year apart, but he wasn't, the words feeling feeling...right somehow...even if they were only said in his head. Part of him had known for a long time that his feelings for El was more than just a simple crush. It was a million times stronger than that. She was everything to him.

How had he survived 354 days without her? He truly didn't know...all he did know was that he would do everything he could to make sure they were never torn apart again. And Mike could tell as her eyes shifted up to his, face suddenly so knowing and sure, that she'd be right there, fighting just as ferociously against anything or anyone that tried to split them, to stay with him as well.

They belonged together. El and Mike. Mike and El. Michael and Eleven. It didn't matter how you put it, there wasn't one without the other. Not anymore. Not since that rainy November night when his flashlight had found her in the woods, so cold and afraid, but looking at them with such hope and trust, and some part of him he hadn't

even understood had just known. It was them against the world now. Forever.

Forever. He liked the sound of that.

Mike was dragged from his thoughts as he felt El's hands suddenly resting on his shoulders, biting her lip nervously as her eyes dipped to his lips, her breath brushing against his face.

His lips tilted up into an small, besotted smile, reaching up to cup her cheeks almost reverently, as he slowly leant forward and pressed his lips to hers.

The kiss was different to their first, longer and less hurried, the nerves that had fluttered in his stomach and made the kiss quick, unsure and filled with embarrassing awkwardness from trying to explain what he meant, that he liked her, absent. This time there was nothing but them, the kiss soft and chaste but sweet as they clung to each other's arms, brushing their lips together gently, neither wanting to pull away just yet.

Mike's chest swelled with uncontrollable joy and pride, heart skipping a beat, as he felt El sigh against his lips. El's eyes fluttered shut, moving her lips back against his for the loveliest minute of her life, squirming slightly as warmth spread from where their lips touched to the very tips of her toes, before they reluctantly moved back, their breathing quick and loud in the sudden silence.

They stared at each other for a long moment before their lips twitched and they were suddenly grinning at each other.

Mike suddenly yawned, his eyes widening, cheeks growing red, mortified. God, he was such a wastoid. Way to ruin the moment, he thought, groaning as he closed his eyes, wanting the floor to swallow him up.

El frowned at him, confused by why he was embarrassed by yawning, he couldn't control it, as she reached up to touch the dark circles under his eyes, lip twitching down in concern.

'You're tired.'

Mike shook his head stubbornly.

'No, I'm fine', he said, barely biting back a groan as he yawned again, his face now feeling so hot he was sure he could roast marshmallows on them.

El pressed her lips together to keep from grinning at his obvious lie, raising an eyebrow at him as if to say 'sure you're not'.

'You should get some sleep, Mike.'

Mike's heart began to race at the thought of closing his eyes, of taking his eyes off her even for a second. He'd done that before...in the science classroom at school when she'd faced the Demogorgon and when he'd open them again she'd been gone...pulled into the Upside Down along with the monster. And he'd lost her for a whole year. No, he couldn't do it....he wouldn't...he thought, shaking his head jerkily, his throat beginning to tighten until his lungs began to burn, screaming for air.

El swallowed as she saw fear and panic quickly fill his eyes, going so pale she was sure he was going to pass out and quickly grabbed his hand, squeezing so tightly she was sure she heard his knuckles crack. But Mike didn't seem to care, holding on just as tightly. And suddenly she understood, her chin wobbling as the memory of the last time they'd been together, of that horrible night where they'd lost each other, came rushing back to her and she knew why he was so afraid.

'It's okay, Mike', she whispered, pressing her forehead to his, keeping her eyes on his so he knew she was there, that she wasn't going anywhere. 'I won't leave you. Never again. I'll be here when you wake up. I'll make Hopper stay till then.'

'Promise?' he said, voice so quiet and filled with fear and hope that El's face crumpled slightly, nodding, expression earnest and determined.

'I promise.'

Mike swallowed hard past the lump that had formed in his throat and reluctantly laid back down onto the floor, closing his eyes. He was

surprised when El laid down beside him, his eyes popping back open as he turned his head to glance nervously at the open door.

Well...Hopper had only said that he couldn't sleep on the bed, he thought, chewing the inside of his cheek as he shifted anxiously. He had never said anything about El not sleeping on the floor with him. And even if he did get mad, Mike found that in that moment he really couldn't care if he got in trouble. It would be worth if it meant getting to stay with her, to sleep beside her all night.

El, unaware of Mike's thoughts, hesitantly laid her head down on his chest, chewing her lip nervously, not sure if he wanted her this close. They hadn't seen each other for a year and she didn't want to him to feel.... El frowned, searching her mind for the word she was looking for her, her face lighting up slightly as she found it, proud of herself for remembering...awkward around her.

All her uncertainty faded away, however, when El felt Mike's arm curl around her waist, tugging in closer until she was pressed against his side, as if he too couldn't bare to be even a few inches away from her. El hid her delighted smile in his chest, closing her eyes as she listened to his heartbeat, letting it's steady beat slowly pull her away into unconsciousness.

Mike's heart skipped a beat as he felt El soften against him, his fingers twitching where they lay on her side, leaning down to press a kiss to her gel-slicked hair, closing his eyes as she sighed, the sound as content as he felt, and he felt his lips twitch up into a smile at the sound.

'I'm glad you're home', he murmured, holding her even closer, nuzzling her head with his chin.

El opened her eyes, remembering the words he'd once said to her in his basement bathroom, everything inside her going soft and melty as she lifted her head to look at him, grinning as his own opened at her movement, giving her a sleepy smile that made her heart sped up in her chest, leaning forward to kiss him gently.

'Me too', she said, laying her head back down on his chest as she closed her eyes again, listening to his breathing until it was slow and

even, making sure he was okay, before she let sleep finally pull her back under, a small smile on her face.

Home. She was finally home.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey guys! I know it's been a long time but I've been suffering the worst writer's block! But I just got an idea and smashed this out in under two hours. I am so happy right now, you have no idea. I can't wait to hear what you think. I've had the idea to add to this one-shot since it came out and am beyond thrilled to finally get this out here! Love you guys xx

El came awake slowly with a groan, feeling too warm, a thin layer of sweat covering her, her clothes twisted, sticking to her body in places that dug into her skin uncomfortably, dragging her reluctantly from sleep.

She swallowed, wincing as the action caused her throat to throb painfully, surprised by how dry and sore it felt, as if she'd swallowed shards of glass or something equally horrible. She shifted, kicking the blanket further off until it settled around her waist, moving to sit up without opening her eyes, pausing as a heavy weight around her waist that she knew wasn't usually there tightened, pulling her back down to lying.

That's new...., she thought, lying very still, muscles going stiff as she quickly took stock of the rest of her environment, holding her breath so as not to alert the person she could suddenly hear breathing beside her that she was awake, panic rising inside her, squeezing her lungs.

She wasn't in a bed, she realised with a quick jolt, forehead furrowing in confusion. The surface beneath her was hard and unyielding, her muscles sore and aching from sleeping on it, and she knew instinctively it wasn't the soft, comfortable mattress she'd grown to love in the cabin or the lumpy one with bed springs that had stabbed and bit into her side at Kali's hideout. She was lying on the floor.

But why? Where was she? she thought, frowning, bewilderment clouding over her sleepy mind for only a few seconds before it suddenly cleared, the answer hitting her like a ton of bricks that she

welcomed happily.

Home, she thought, as her eyes flew open, eagerness filling her as she turned her head slowly to the side and looked across at the boy who lay beside her his face only inches from her own, their shared blanket curling around both their waists. She was back home. Back with Mike, and Hopper, and her friend's, just as she'd dreamed of for the long 353 days she'd been waiting.

Her face softened, her heart skipping a beat before beginning to race as she scooted in closer, a small smile tilting her lips as she stared down at Mike. He snored lightly, his mouth slack and hanging open, lashes brushing his pale cheeks, his dark hair sticking up crazily all over his head. His skin was still smeared and stained with dirt and the greyish gunk from the tunnels and she narrowed her eyes at the sight.

She was still mad at him for going into the tunnels, for putting himself in danger like that, even though she knew it was....what was the word Hopper said....she thought, nose crinkling thoughtfully before her eyes lit up...hypocritical of her, since she'd done the same thing.

Now she knew what Mike felt whenever she went out to fight one of the monsters that seemed plague them, a pang filling her at the pain he must felt, the terror she now knew grabbed you by the throat, choking and making it hard to breathe, the fear that clawed inside your stomach, a scratching, manic thing that dug it's claw in deep and refused to let go until you knew the one you loved was safe. She didn't know how he'd survived it, not once but twice, but she was going to make sure neither of them had to feel that way again. Well...she was going to try. With the way danger just seemed to follow them wherever they went, it might just prove impossible. But next time they would face whatever might come for them together. They would never be apart again....not if she had any say in it, she thought, determination filling her.

El ran a hand over her face as she yawned, grimacing in disgust as her fingers came away covered in the black make-up that Kali and her friend's had put on her only a day ago, when it felt like another lifetime ago. She reached up to touch her hair, now sticking up stiffly

from the hair gel and had to bite back a groan. Ugh, she didn't want to think about how bad she looked. Or smelt, the layers of dirt and sweaty she'd accumulated over the last few days leaving her feeling sticky and grimy, her upper lip stiff and crusted over with dried blood.

Mike didn't seem to care though, warmth spreading through every part of her, as he shifted closer in his sleep, their limbs tangled even further together until El wasn't sure where she finished and he began. Her insides softened and fluttered in the strange way they always did around Mike, a feeling that left her giddy and made her cheeks grow warm, and which Hopper had once explained, his face bright red and eyes squinting in a way she now knew meant he was feeling awkward and uncomfortable, were called butterflies, as she reached out to brush his hair out of his eyes, taking in all the ways he'd changed over the last year.

He'd grown....longer, her feet barely brushing the middle of his calf as he lay beside her, and she'd had to stand on her toes to wrap her arms around him the night before when they'd hugged. All the baby fat had faded from his face completely and now it was all angles and sharpness. She reached out to brush her fingers against his cheek, almost expecting it to cut her, and smiled when it was soft, her fingers tracing the freckles there. Before she'd known every freckles that covered his cheeks, having counted them the day he'd sat beside her in the cafeteria, rambling in a way she couldn't understand, before he'd pressed his lips to hers for the very first time, an act she now knew was called a kiss. There's been thirty-four freckles in total, the tiny dark flecks that made up the constellation of stars that sat across his cheeks and nose, but now there was dozens more.

She brushed her fingers along his chin, pausing when he shifted in his sleep, his face scrunching up in a sleepy, grumpy way that made her grin, biting back a quiet giggle. He sighed, settling back down as he nuzzled into her touch, his lips tilting up into a sweet smile that made her breath catch, chin wobbling. Even unconscious, Mike wanted to be as close to her as she did to him.

El's breath shuddered out on a happy little sob as she leant down and kissed his nose, before she sighed, reluctantly pulling away from him. As much as she wished she could lay there with him forever, to doze

sleepily all day, content to just be together, a mounting pressure against her bladder was quickly making it's presence known, her need growing more urgent with every second she delayed.

She slipped out from under Mike's arm carefully, not wanting to wake him. He'd been so tired the night before, barely able to keep his eyes open or stop yawning even as much as he'd wanted to. He needed all the sleep he could get. She held her breath as she rose up onto her knees to get up, holding her breath when he frowned, rolling over onto his stomach with a grumble.

She let out her breath slowly in a loud 'phew', quietly rising to her feet and tip-toeing to the door, pulling it shut behind her with a click that sounded louder than a gun shot to her, flinching at it. Her stomach gurgled hungrily, feeling empty and hollow as she searched for the bathroom, trying several rooms, first finding a sleeping Jonathan and Nancy curled up in his bed and a closet filled with sheets, before she finally found the bathroom and closed the door quickly, her bladder feeling like it was about to burst.

When she was finished, she made her way down the short hallway, stilling in the middle of the room as she saw Joyce was already seated at the kitchen table, swamped in a pale blue dressing gown, a cigarette dangling from her finger tips. She stared blankly down at the table, her fingers tracing the grains in the wood, her eyes red-rimmed, face pale.

El's eyebrows drew together as she looked at her, her stomach clenching as a sick feeling filled her that she didn't recognise, but would realise in years to come was a shared grief for the woman who was the only mother she'd ever truly known, her own so sick and lost in her mind that she couldn't comfort her or look after her like she knew she had wanted to, who had fought for her and suffered horribly for it. She knew what loss looked like, even if she didn't understand why Joyce was so sad. Will was back. So why wasn't she happy?

A sound drew El's attention away and she glanced into the living room, the window she'd thrown the Demodog through still a jagged mess of glass hastily patched up with cardboard to keep the cold autumn air outside and the floor covered in Will's drawings of the

tunnels, and let out a loud giggle at the sight of Hopper lying on the couch, a pillow pulled over his head. His loud snores broke up the silence of the house, sounding like the muffled roar of a lion that she had seen on the television.

Joyce jumped at the sound of her giggle, dropping her cigarette into the ash tray as her head snapped up. Her startled expression melted away into a gentle smile as she saw El standing in front of her, not used to seeing her so happy. She'd definitely never heard her laugh before, but it was enough to melt a tiny bit of the cold, numbness that had seemed to fill her entire being since Bob's death the night before.

'Morning, sweetheart. I didn't expect to see you or anyone else up this early. Everyone else is still asleep. How are you feeling?'

El shrugged, looking down at her feet, shifting awkwardly.

'My head hurts a little....but not as bad as last night. I'm okay,' she said, and she was telling the truth. It was nothing like the pain she had felt the night before, as if her very mind was splintering into a million pieces, stabbing into her skull, now just a dull throbbing at her temples that she didn't really notice unless she focused hard. Her powers was still drained as well, nothing but an empty well inside her when there had always been a buzzing...something...that raced through her veins, just waiting for her to summon it, leaving her feeling....strange, as if something was missing. But it would be back, just as it had come back after she'd defeated the Demogorgon. She wasn't worried.

Joyce blinked at her, stunned by the nonchalant way she talked about what she'd done, as if that much blood coming from her body or pain was normal. But it to her it was, she realised, fury rising inside her. It made her sick that anyone, let alone a child, could ever get used to pain, so that she just shrugged it off. The mere thought of her locked up in those labs, forced to do experiments over and over that made her head ache, blood dripping from her nose and ears, draining the very energy from it and leaving her weak, helpless and sometimes unconscious for hours just for their own gain made her want to hunt them all down and punish them for what they'd done to this sweet, brave, selfless girl.

Well, no more. She would do whatever it took to make sure she was protected, that no-one, human or otherwise, could ever hurt this girl again.

Joyce stood up, walking over to ran a hand over El's hair, not caring that it was sticky with gel, her touch so gentle it brought tears to El's eyes.

'Do you want anything to make the headache go away? We have some painkillers or cough medicine that could help....'

El's breath stuttered in her throat at the word 'medicine', her eyes going wide with fear at the question as she quickly shook her head, stumbling back a step.

'No, no....no....no medicine...' she gasped out, terror filling her at the thought of taking any type of pill or medicine after what they'd forced her to take in the labs, little tablets that made her throw up all her dinner or made her very bones ache.

Joyce's heart almost broke at the complete terror on the girl's face, stepping forward and grabbing her shoulders gently, rubbing them soothingly as she bent down so she was eye-level with her, looking into her panicked, brown eyes.

'It's okay, El. You don't have to take anything you don't want to. It's your choice, always, okay?'

El nodded jerkily, taking a deep breath as she relaxed under Joyce's hands, sagging against her, turning her face into her stomach as her own twisted with embarrassment.

'I'm sorry....I didn't mean to get upset....'

Joyce shook her head quickly, pulling the slight girl into her arms.

'Shush, honey, it's okay. It's not your fault', she told her, kissing her head gently, rocking her from side to side, the knot that had formed in her chest at the sight of her completely falling apart loosening as she felt El's arm come around her.

She'd changed so much in the last year, Joyce thought as she held her. She was speaking so well, talking in full sentences when before they had to struggle to get her to say a single word to the adults, not understanding the simple phrases and words that to the rest of them was common knowledge. She had also put some weight on, her cheeks fuller and with a healthy flush, no longer deathly pale as she was last night, her veins receded back where they belonged. She looked like any girl her own age (maybe a tired one, but still). Even if she was currently going through her punk stage, Joyce thought, chuckling inwardly. Hopper had definitely done something right.

Joyce sent Hopper a soft look where he lay, pale and exhausted, on her couch across from a still unconscious Steve Harrington, who face looked like it had been put through a meat tenderiser in the early morning light. If he didn't wake up soon she'd have to take him to the hospital and get him checked over. She bit her lip worriedly, before turning back to El, bopping her on the nose as she pulled back.

'How about a shower instead? You must be feeling pretty gross.'

El pulled her face into a disgusted grimace as she looked down at herself that made Joyce laugh, stepping back from the hug.

'I'll take that as a yes then. Come on, I'll just grab some old clothes of Will's. You look like you'll be around the same size.'

Joyce turned the water on as El stripped out of her dirty clothes, making sure it wouldn't burn her, and took a seat on the toilet seat when El asked her to stay, pulling the shower curtain around so she'd have some privacy. They spoke as she showered, washing the layers of grim and the stubborn hair gel out of with shampoo that smelt heavenly, like lavender and other girly stuff, unlike the horrible shampoo that Hopper used that smelt like boys. She told her all about living with Hopper, about learning Morse code and how to use the radio, how she had her very own bed with real blankets and a teddy bear, how they read 'Anne of Green Gables' every night before sleep, dessert always came after dinner, watching the television during the day and, of course, Eggo Extravaganzas. She didn't tell her about meeting her Mom, the pain of learning the truth about what the Bad Men had done to her too new and raw, and this was a happy moment. She didn't want to be sad now, there was plenty of time for

that later.

Joyce helped her dry her hair after she stepped out of the shower, already dressed in an old pair of sweat-pants that still hung off her and a collared blue shirt.

'Huh,' she said, blinking, stunned by the dark brown curls that begun to slowly bounce up all over her head, now free from the restraints of hair gel. Curly...who would've thought.

El glanced up at her, suddenly looking nervous as she glanced out into the hallway, not meeting her eyes as she twisted her fingers into her borrowed shirt.

'How is he? How's Will?'

Will, the boy she'd never officially met, except for the time she'd spoken to him in the Upside Down, promising him that his Mom was coming for him, to hold on. The boy they'd all fought to save from yet another monster, one who had not only taken him from his family, but taken over his body and mind this time as well. The ones who inspired so much loyalty from his friend's, friend's who had been willing to fight a creature from nightmares with a wrist rocket to save him. She had never met Will but he was as real to her as Dustin, Lucas or Mike, and as much her friend. Or, at least, she hoped he would be. That he liked her and wanted to be her friend as much as she wanted to be his. What if he didn't like her? What if he wasn't okay?

Joyce's eyes softened on El as she saw the worry on her face, her lips quirking up into a sad smile even as she squeezed her shoulder reassuringly.

Her poor little boy, who'd been through so much. He'd been so exhausted and quiet when she'd put him to bed the night before, asleep before she'd even managed to pull the covers over him. Dark circles hung under his eyes, so heavy she was irrationally worried they'd never go away, after his days of little sleep and battling the monster that had invaded his mind, controlling and using him against his friend's and family. He'd barely moved the whole night, face still pale and body weak, voice a mere croak when he had spoken to her,

but he was back. Her little boy was back and safe and himself again. And she knew she owed a lot of that to the girl in front of her. If it wasn't for her, the monster would still be out there, probably looking for another one of them to take and use for it's own whims.

'He's tired and still feels a bit...strange after everything but he's okay. Thanks to you. You did such a brave thing for us, for me, again and I am so grateful, sweetheart.'

El felt her cheeks grow warm and quickly ducked her head, not used to such praise. She scuffed her toe along the grating in the tiled floor to avoid looking up into Joyce's proud face.

She didn't think she'd done anything especially brave or heroic. She'd only done what any of her friend's would have done for her- what they had done for her, going into the tunnels to distract the monster so she would have a chance. She would do it again without a single thought it this was the outcome, if it meant her friend's, Hopper, Joyce, Steve, and Jonathan, even the red-headed girl named Max, and Mike, who was not a friend, not a brother, but something else entirely, would be safe. That they would be together again.

El opened her mouth, not entirely sure how to respond when she froze, eyes going wide as she heard Mike suddenly yell out, voice thick and shrill with fear.

'El? EL! Where are you?'

Chest tightening with her own panic, El burst out of the bathroom, her hair still dripping slightly onto her top, soaking it as she rushed out into the kitchen where Mike stood, freckles stark against his deathly white face, tear-filled eyes frantic as they bounced around the room, his hands in his hair, tugging so hard it must have hurt as he searched for something.

He was searching for her, she realised, her throat closing off with guilt at the way she must have scared him, heart aching.

'Mike!'

Mike spun around, his face crumpling as his eyes found her standing

in the doorway, her beautiful eyes wide with worry, obviously having come from the shower. He let out a quiet sob, his lungs, that had felt like they stopped working the second he'd woken up and foudn the other side of their make-shift bed empty, the sheets cold, as if she'd never been there, finally filling with air again, his chest loosening.

Terror unlike anything he'd ever felt had filled him at the sight of her gone, worse than when she'd been facing the Demogorgon right in front of him in the science labs, or going off to fight the Mind Flayer only minutes after he'd finally gotten her back. He'd been sure she was gone, that he'd imagined the whole thing, that she'd been a figment of his imagination that had slipped through his fingers as she had so many times in his dreams. But it was okay. She was here and she was safe. He finally had her back.

But Mike knew that the panic he'd felt at finding her gone would never truly fade, that even if they were together for a lifetime, he would still wake up fearing her gone again. It wasn't something he would ever forget or get over. He'd lost a part of him for a long time, and those types of scars could heal, but they would always leave a mark.

'I'm sorry, Mike,' El said, running forward and hugging him, pressing her face into his neck, holding him tight as she felt him shudder with barely held back sobs. 'I didn't think....I....I didn't mean to scare you.'

'No, El, don't be sorry', Mike began, pulling back and wiping his nose on his sleeve with a sheepish smile, his wet cheeks flushing bright red, the panic that he'd felt fading away, leaving him feeling nothing but embarrassed for his outburst. But he could tell from the gentle way El squeezed his hand, her eyes bright and full of such feelings that Mike thought his heart would burst out of his chest at the sight, that she understood. 'I'm the complete wasteoid who freaked out over nothing. You promised you wouldn't leave, I should've have known...'

Mike trailed off, his eyes widening as he took her in fully now that his panic had receded, staring in awe at the mop of curls that had sprung up around her head, heart speeding up again as his mouth fell open.

Curls! She had curls! In all the times he'd thought about seeing her

again, had wondered if she'd be happy to see him, or what she'd look like now, he'd never once could have imagined her with curls. They made her entire face look different, less fierce and warrior-like as the shaved head and slicked back hair from last night had made her look. No, the curls made her look soft and delicate, but also strong, all at the same time.

Mike lifted a shaking hand, unable to resist the urge to wrap a finger around one of them, stunned by how soft they were.

'You have curls,' he said, dumbly, stunned.

El blushed, reaching up to touch her hair self-consciously, looking up at him shyly.

'Uh yeah...it just...grew that way. Do you like it?'

Mike nodded immediately, his lips tugging up into a wide grin that eased the slight worry that had stirred to life her when she'd first seen his reaction, the way he'd just stared, not speaking. She'd been worried he wouldn't like her hair like that, that he'd thought she looked bad and wouldn't like her anymore. It was silly of her. She knew Mike would always like her, no matter what she looked like.

'I love them. They're really...pretty', he said after thinking for a moment, using the word that had changed things between them during that week in November. The moment she'd stepped out of Nancy's room and he'd realised with a quick lightning bolt of shock, a quiet 'oh' that sounded in his suddenly blank mind that he liked her. Like liked her. And those feelings had only grown stronger from then on.

El smiled, her heart speeding up in her chest, cheeks growing even warmer as she remembered as well, giddy happiness bubbling up inside her until all she wanted to do was jump up and down with it or lean back against a wall all dramatically like they did in the soap operas she watched at the cabin.

Her eyes dipped shyly to the floor before lifting back up, the look in them making Mike's heart race as she slowly leant forward, closing her eyes, lips moving closer and closer.

Oh my god...was she going to...Mike thought, mouth going dry even as his own eyes drifted shut, shifting towards her....

'Hey, none of that, thank you', Hopper suddenly said, making them both jump back guiltily, turning as one to stare at Hopper who still lay on the couch, his words muffled by the pillow still pulled over his head, even as he turned to raise his eyebrows at them, face stern, though his eyes were bright with amusement.

Mike didn't notice any of that as he quickly blanched, gulping audibly at the threat he imagined on the Chief of Police's face, his face growing so terrified El laughed, rolling her eyes at Hopper who only grinned back, rolling back over to try and get a little more shut-eye before the hoarde of pre-teens his adopted daughter called friend's descended on the place as he knew they would soon enough.

'Don't worry,' she whispered, reaching over to grab his hand and pull him towards the table where Joyce had quietly laid out a carton of milk and chocolately cereal before given them some privacy, 'He's only joking'.

Mike nodded, though he wasn't sure whether to believe her, swallowing hard as he sent a nervous look towards the Chief who it seemed had already fallen back asleep, as if the whole last two minutes hadn't happened. He wasn't scared of the Chief, as last night's fight with him and stand-off about staying with El could show, but that didn't mean he wanted to get caught kissing his daughter either. The man owned a bloody gun!

El leant forward and kissed his cheek, smiling as she saw the way he blushed, grateful that he hadn't lost that particular trait when she was gone and quickly filled their bowls, pouring in so much milk it spilled over a bit.

They both dug in eagerly, Mike using his left hand and El her right to eat, their others tangled together beneath the kitchen table, neither wanting to let go. When El lean her head against his shoulder, Mike suddenly knew that everything would be alright from now. Because they had each other. And they would never let go again.

Notes for the Chapter:

What did you think? I can't wait to hear from you all. It's been way too long- Katie xx

Author's Note:

I've never written a one-shot so please, please let me know what you think. You're reviews give me life I swear. Love you all xx- Katie.